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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000577

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, AND NEA/ARP
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/27/2014
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: NASRALLAH DEFENDS HIMSELF, PRAISES
ALLIES, FLIRTS WITH JUMBLATT

REF: BEIRUT 563

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah delivered two speeches on May 22 and May 25 to mark the ninth anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon. His speeches attempted to respond to critics of his recent comments praising Hizballah's actions in May 7, 2008 events and calling for the death penalty for Israeli spies, and responding to a Der Spiegel article that said Hizballah was implicated in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. These speeches were noticeably less fiery than prior remarks (Reftel), as Nasrallah toned down his rhetoric, encouraging the Lebanese people to remember the history of the "resistance". They were, however, still criticized by some members of the March 14 majority, who called it an attempt to negatively affect the upcoming parliamentary elections. End Summary.

A TONED DOWN NASRALLAH

2. (C) Less than two weeks before the June 7 parliamentary elections, Hizballah SYG Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah delivered two speeches on May 22 and May 25 to mark the ninth anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon. In contrast to remarks made earlier in the week, these speeches were calmer in nature, with a more focused message. On May 22, speaking via video-link to a rally held in Nabatieh, Nasrallah told supporters that anyone caught spying for Israel, regardless of their religion, should be put to death under Lebanese law. "I call for the capital punishment for all arrested agents beginning with the Shia agents first," he demanded. Nasrallah praised efforts deployed by the Lebanese Army and security forces to uncover Israeli espionage networks, and said Hizballah's security services would boost cooperation with Lebanese security services to root out the spies.

3. (C) At Raya stadium in the Sfeir neighborhood in Dahiyeh on May 25, Nasrallah said that his earlier recent statements, in which he described May 7, 2008 as "a glorious day"

(Reftel), were "taken out of context," adding, "May 7 was a painful and sad day, because civilians died and property was destroyed." He branded as pure "fabrication" German magazine Der Spiegel's report that Hizballah was behind the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

Nasrallah praised Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, and called his actions "positive during the Doha talks," adding, "Hizballah's relationship with all parties is good, especially with the Progressive Socialist Party." He ended by praising his political ally Michel Aoun, head of the March 8-aligned Free Patriotic Movement, claiming that the FPM-Hizballah coalition "is not a temporary electoral alliance, but a national, responsible and strategic alliance."

SPEECHES RECEIVE MIXED REACTION

¶4. (C) Nasrallah's remarks prompted varied reaction by political observers. In a May 26 interview with Al Jazeera, Jumblatt said he was "satisfied with Nasrallah's comments that May 7 was a painful day," and that "mistakes happened on May 5 because there wasn't any kind of contact between the cabinet and Hizballah to discuss Hizballah's communication network." Future Movement MP and March 14 ally Ammar Hourani said that Nasrallah made a good political move "by changing his description of May 7 from a glorious day to a sad day." While according to Elie Khoury, advisor to Lebanese Armed Forces head Samir Geagea, Nasrallah's consecutive speech on this issue was a "recovery policy for a bad statement," adding that Nasrallah realized the mistake he committed and

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tried to fix it.

¶5. (C) Dr. Selim el-Sayegh, Vice President of the Kataeb Party, told senior political LES that Nasrallah, by touching upon several issues in his speeches, was trying to consolidate his support base prior to the June 7 parliamentary elections. Nasrallah wanted to send a clear message that the "resistance" still exists, it is still the majority, and that a large population of Lebanese still are in favor of the "resistance's" political line. Sayegh added that Nasrallah's appraisal of Michel Aoun was an attempt to refloat Aoun, who has been embraced by Hizballah to the extent of suffocation." Sayegh also mentioned that the timing of the Der Spiegel report was "not innocent" and linked its release to the parliamentary elections. He described the report as a "double edged sword," clarifying that on one hand it could encourage undecided voters to move away from Hizballah, while on the other hand, it could be used by Hizballah as an excuse not to cooperate with the tribunal.

¶6. (C) Hariri, the slain leader's son and head of the current parliamentary majority, said he would not comment on anything unless officially stated by the UN-backed tribunal, while Jumblatt called the article more dangerous than events that led to the 1975 civil war.

COMMENT

¶8. With less than two weeks until the parliamentary elections, politicians have been increasing the frequency of their speeches, while verbal battles on news talk shows are getting fiercer. Nasrallah sought to use his May 25 speech to reach out to Jumblatt and strengthen Aoun's position, but also reminded the country that the "resistance" still exists and has popular support. Hariri and other March 14 official's very statesman-like comments to the Der Spiegel report could be considered a sign of maturity, but is most likely attributed to the fact that he and his allies have long accused the Syrians, who controlled Lebanon at the time, and not Hizballah, of involvement in the murder. End Comment.

